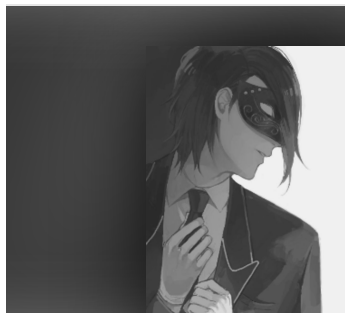




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The man in the mask



romance

masquerade

fantasy

487 63 57

Chapter 1 by Auntie Em

Masquerade, every face a different shade, some orange, some pink, some blue, some red.

But there was only one mask that caught my eye, a dark figure in the corner.

His black hair was swept neatly over a mask of the same color. All that was revealed of his face was a mocking smile tugging at the corner of his otherwise serious mouth.

I watched him as I danced on the stage of the music hall. I was an underpaid ballet girl performing in a feature opera. Our opera travels from venue to venue, usually performing at parties like this, or sometimes at music festivals. We dance until our feet bleed, and then start again the next day. I've always thought I could accomplish more than ballet, that maybe one day I could make my own music, instead of just dancing to it.

I just needed to find the right melody.

As the curtain closed, I walked back to my dance bag. The whole company had brought masks and gowns for the party which we were to attend afterwards. I was not at all in the mood, but I

pulled out my soft pink dress and matching mask. It had to be lightly corseted, which I despised doing, but otherwise it didn't fit me.

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Often it was an odd mix of major and minor keys, slow and haunting and beautiful. But, as soon as I got an idea it always slipped away from me.

I began to hum a new tune to myself. I loved just being alone with my music, my melody resonating in the empty darkness.

However, it was different this time, because I could sense that I was not alone.

The man in the mask stepped out from the shadows and spoke, "Your voice is beautiful."

Chapter 2 by pandora



There were many things I wanted to say. I wanted to ask him how he'd heard my voice, when I had not sang the whole performance and when all I had done was hum a bland tune just now. I wanted to ask him how he had walked from the corner of my eyes to directly in front of me so quickly. But instead, I responded with a breathless "Thank you."

I'm accustomed to saying that because it's not very unusual for me to receive compliments after a show. It's not because I'm skilled (though I am), it's simply because I have a pretty face- a fact I've been reminded of in various ways, some less warming than others.

But the fact was that he wasn't complimenting me on my dance, but rather my voice made it not a meager "Thank you" but rather, a breathless one.

And there was a very large difference.

The man smiled, and by that I mean that the base of his lips widened just a bit and the tug of his smirk remained the same.

It annoyed me that I had gotten so worked up over someone that could give me nothing more than a smirk when all I had wanted was to be alone with my music.

"If that was all that you came to say, sir..." I paused, thinking over some very choice words that all really just meant "then you may take a hike" and the stranger seemed to read my mind.

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how did he know that he liked my voice?

"Whatever you're thinking, Miss, you are frighteningly close to the truth."

Suddenly I felt like my dress wasn't very opaque, and the corset was a little too tight, and his smirk became a little colder.

"I'm sorry, Miss. But I will have to ask for this dance from you. And I'm afraid you cannot refuse."

Chapter 3 by Sophia Mathis



I could only stare at him for a few long moments, then finally accept his offer to dance.

"It would be my pleasure, Mr....?"

"My name is not of concern. After all, this is a masquerade, madam."

He gave me a smile then took my hand and lead me out from backstage to the foyer in which the party was being held. There were tons of women in beautiful, exquisite dresses and men dressed in sharp suits and lavish costumes. When we reached the center of the foyer and began to dance, I truly had a moment to study this mysterious and yet alluring man. He had jet black hair with deep brown eyes that seemed to penetrate your very soul... And yet they were so gentle and kind.

We danced so gracefully together. So gracefully, people started to stare. We made our way to the center of the circle of dancing men and women and it seemed all eyes were on us. Couples began to clear the floor to make room for us. Soon we were the only ones on the dance floor. The song ended and there was a huge applause. He opened his mouth and said,

Chapter 4 by Molly G



"Thank you everybody! I am privileged to dance with my beautiful and very talented fiancée."

"What?" I hiss between my teeth, trying to keep a lady-like expression plastered on my face as the crowd erupts into more applause and he begins to raise his hand to slap him.

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"You'll find there /is/ a /good/ reason for this" He replies, copying my emphasis. How on earth did I feel attracted to this man? He's crazy!

"That I might be, madam, but attractive! How nice of you" his smooth voice interrupts my thoughts and I squirm, glaring at him.

"You /can/ read my thoughts!" He bows, forcing me to curtsy with him, then drags me out the door into the cool night air.

I didn't bring a jumper, and the air starts chilling me to the bone. I shiver, and I feel a warm arm around my shoulders. I don't try to shake it off as already, I can feel warmth spreading through my body. Leading me to a seat he sits, gesturing for me to do the same. "Answers please" I order.

He smiles at me, before replying, "You will get plenty of those. But first, may I say, you have a very strong mind. I could only gain access to your very strong or surface thoughts. Don't interrupt. Now, I only pretended you're my fiancée, because nobody would let you leave with me if they thought I was a complete stranger. You must come with me to Ourvanas- a university established to help people with... strong mindedness - for further questioning. You must trust me." With that, he pulled me to my feet, put his arm around my waist and led me to the forest.

"Wait!" I whisper, "How can I follow someone if I can't see their face, don't know their name, let alone know anything about them?" Whipping off his mask, he fixed me with a gaze that held something I couldn't quite pick up. Tenderness? His eyes softened and he said "My name is Peter"

Chapter 5 by Auntie Em



Peter, I thought, was much too simple a name for this complicated and mysterious man, but somehow his name made him more personal, more human. So did seeing his face, so exposed and open...

Before I could examine him more closely, he whipped back on his mask, and the strange

tenderness to his eyes disappeared in an instant.

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"I shouldn't have done that. I can't tell stories to anyone. That's why I wear the mask. That's why you weren't supposed to find out."

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"But why? Why can't you just be open with me?"

He paused than said frankly, "It just never works out. My gift, it makes people uneasy, hurts them, hurts me. I find out secrets I don't want to hear..."

Suddenly, beneath the mask his eyes start to water. It seems to annoy him, but he can't make the tears go away. Eventually he has no choice to take the mask off and wipe his eyes, then he straightens himself back up, but the sadness remains.

Then he starts to speak. "The last time I got close to someone, it was a strong minded girl like you. It was nice not knowing everything about her, and I could tell her anything. Soon friendship turned to love. I was about to propose, when I caught one thought that was drifting at the top of her head.", he paused and hung his head, "She had been cheating on me with another man. And she had tried to hide it."

His saddened gaze remained chiseled on his face for a few moments that seemed to last forever. Then, he stood up and put back on his mask. Then he began to walk away.

"Come on. We're burning daylight."

I ran to catch up, then turned him around.

"Hey. The good thing about me is, I'm an open book. My life has been pretty uneventful up until just about now.", I looked down and then into his big brown eyes. I wanted so badly to remove his mask. Instead, I leaned in, and softly kissed his lips.

He blushed. "I knew you were going to do that."

I smiled. "Then why didn't you stop me?"

Chapter 6 by Sophia Mathis



"Because I wanted you to."

My grin grew wider. I leaned in for another kiss and he gladly obliged. suddenly he pulled back and looked at me passionately. He asked,

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"After everything that has happened, I want to know you better. Tell me your name."

"I guess you don't. Well, my name is Sophia, Sophia Elizabeth."

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"My, what a beautiful name for a beautiful girl."

I only blushed in response and smiled at him warmly.

We kept walking and eventually reached a grand house on the outskirts of town. Peter opened the door and gestured grandly inside.

"Welcome Sophia, to my humble abode."

I stepped inside and took in my surroundings. It was even more beautiful on the inside, but it was slightly cluttered, there were sketches and music sheets everywhere, and the piano in the center of the room was the only thing that seemed to be clean and clear. Peter walked over to the piano and sat down. He patted the spot on the bench next to him. I walked over and joined him. He asked,

"Do you want to know my gift?"

"Of course!"

"Very well. All you have to do is listen."

He placed his hands on the keys and began to play. The notes echoed in the silent house and I was completely possessed by his music.... It was the most beautiful thing I have ever heard, so full of passion. But then, he began to sing,

"Night time sharpens, heightens each sensation. Darkness stirs, and wakes imagination. Silently the senses, abandon their defenses....."

I could only listen in shock and awe. His voice was truly beautiful. He continued,

"Slowly, gently, night unfurls it's splendor. Grasp it, sense it, tremulous and tender. Turn your face away from the garish light of day, turn your face away from cold, unfeeling light, and listen to the Music Of the Night!"

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When he stopped playing I could hear the door creaking open.

He smiled softly and said,

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"Well, Sophia, Let us hear your gift!"

Chapter 7 by Eleana Fairbairn



"But... I can't play..." How could I compare myself to this mysterious, amazingly talented man?

"Yes, you can." I looked with confusion at him.

"No, I'm pretty sure I..." Just then, he took my hands and placed them on the piano. He sat me down.

"Play." I had no choice. So I played a tune I learnt from my mother. As I started to play, I began to feel the music coursing through my veins. I tossed the little tune aside and let my emotions take over. Whilst I was playing, I snuck a glance at Peter. He was gazing, entranced, at me.

"Fine. Say it. I told you so." He gave a nonchalant shrug and gestured to me to keep playing. So I did.

Suddenly, he pulled me up and played a song of his own.

"Let me see your other gift." He asked. "Dance." I began to feel the music inside of me. And so I danced. Like I had never done before. Twisting my arms gracefully, up and down, leaping into the air, pirouetting, twirling. I danced with so much feeling, moving around the grand piano, carefully avoiding every obstacle.

Peter jumped up. "We have to go. I need to get you to Ourvanas before dawn."

I nodded my head. I knew this was too good to be true.

"Can't we stay here?"

"We could, but I would lose my job. Not trying to be pushy though."

I bowed my head.

"Let's go"

Chapter 8 by >

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For the past few minutes, it has been a silent journey, with me just dragging each foot forward while following Peter. I did not know how long it had been so long since I last felt that kind of bliss.

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Peter must have noticed my grim state since he stopped walking, and since my head was bowed down, I did not notice that he did. I bumped my head on his back.

"A penny for your thoughts?" His masked face was shadowed against the setting sun, but his eyes shone with concern as he leaned forward to match my height.

"What, you can't read my thoughts now?"

"Your head is a bit chaotic and hard to understand, Sophie, that's why this is bothering me."

I was still a little bit disappointed so I stayed quiet and just shrugged without meeting his eyes and he appeared irritated by this. After a few moments of silence - of him staring me down and me refusing to fold, he finally heaved a sigh and brought me up to his shoulder.

"What the- Peter put me down right now!" I shrieked as I pounded on his back.

"I'm not putting you down until you tell me what's eating you up."

I scoffed and stopped struggling.

A few more moments passed and I gave up acting like a child so I told Peter calmly to put me down. He did.

"So, Sophia. What's up?"

I met his soft, concerned eyes. "I- I'm scared, Peter."

"Scared of what, Sophia?"

"Of what they'll do to me."

Peter was silent for a while, but then he surprised me by tugging my shoulders towards him and holding me close. "Don't, okay? I'll protect you. I'll never let them do anything for you."

I nodded my head in reply, at a loss for words.

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"Okay," he took my hand and

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After almost two hours of walking, we finally got to the place he called Ourvanas. It was already dark - about midnight - so I didn't see much of it. But when we reached the gate of what seemed like a mansion, my breath left my lungs in a whisper of disbelief.

the end

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